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ABSTRACT

Policy debate as an activity should be maintained but must be invigorated. Some reasons to save policy debate are (1) the benefit to large numbers of students who might otherwise fail to debate given the increased difficulty associated with learning how to play the game; (2) the shrinking size of policy tournaments, which makes it easier for programs to enter the activity and hope to have a measure of success; and (3) the increased number of topics that receive consideration, which results in increased awareness of significant contemporary problems. The growth of policy debate can be fostered by making a commitment to the development of novice debate; judging the impact of college debate institutes; filling the resource gap by sharing materials; and modifying the point system to reward programs which field large numbers of teams. (KEH)

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POLICY DEBATE: AN ACTIVITY WORTH SAVING

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Policy Debate: An Activity Worth Saving

It was extremely difficult to motivate myself to write this paper since most of the arguments have been made before, and probably more eloquently, with little or no result. I was in attendance at the meeting held at Northwestern University about five years ago where members of the policy debate community began to genuinely worry about the continued viability of the activity. There were a number of concerns voiced at that time, but contrary to contemporary debate theory, which relegates presumption to an inferior position, the group fell victim to the power of that presumption and nothing was done. One primary reason appeared to be that many of the "grand old leaders of debate" characterized what was happening to policy debate as merely a cycle which would run its course and policy debate would eventually return to good health. Maybe we have not hit the bottom of the cycle, but it would appear that we are perilously close to "a" bottom if not "the" bottom and I am not convinced that we will begin moving upward merely due to natural cyclic forces. At any rate that is enough fretting and now I will turn my attention to why we should and perhaps how we might invigorate policy debate.

WHY SAVE POLICY DEBATE:

EASE OF TEACHING

A primary reason to save policy debate is that it is relatively easy to impart to debaters. The continued viability of any game is based upon the transmission of the rules to the

participants and their understanding of those rules. If the rules, i.e., standards that govern the argumentation in the debates are not clear then it is increasingly difficult to train the participants. It seems to me that traditional policy debate can be understood reasonably easily by most students regardless of past experience. One reason for this is that it is based upon the same system of logical analysis that is taught in a number of courses across the K-12 curriculum, as well as, at the college level. Given this compatibility with what they already know students can readily grasp the basic concepts necessary to policy analysis. Given that many of the other skills and concepts necessary to successfully debate are of high degrees of difficulty, keeping some relatively simple makes sense.

Another set of participants who are benefited by this simplicity are the critics. I think it is extremely important that a game whose outcome is determined by the vote of a third party have a set of rules which are consistently applied. Uniformity of application is critical to fairness and without a clear, well developed set of guidelines for the game, uniformity of application is impossible and so goes fairness. I think it is clear that we already have a great deal of variability in judging criteria, and any thing we can do to reduce that variability enhances the game. The well developed nature of policy debate theory and practice fosters this necessary consistency.

The maintenance of simplicity also helps somewhat in reducing the "load" of those who are teaching the activity. Anything which affects an individuals willingness to begin

teaching or continue teaching any kind of debate has over the past few years been of increasing concern. Debate is time and energy intensive and even given the clear benefits to students those persons providing debate instruction sometimes find it easier to teach other less demanding subjects or activities.

Another benefit to the maintenance of traditional models of debate, which warrants emphasis, is that they can be more readily taught to novice debaters and that the methods of policy debate make the most sense to a student who walks in with no prior debate experience. In large part the existence of a long tradition is also partly the reason why policy debate has a consistent, elegant, set of rules which are well established and, therefore, understandable and transmittable.

In summary, if we lose policy debate we have lost a type of debate which can benefit a large number of students who might otherwise fail to debate given the increased difficulty associated with learning how to play the game.

INCREASED CHANCE OF SUCCESS

A second significant reason, and perhaps the only real reason, to maintain policy debate is that given the shrinking size of policy tournaments it is now somewhat easier for programs to enter the activity and hope to have a measure of success. As an example of this, I received a call from a new program affiliated with the American Debate Association just the other day and during the conversation the coach indicated two important things. First, that his squad had been helped a great deal by the materials we had provided for his program, both general

theory and practice materials, as well as, a few modest briefs. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, he indicated that his squad was really looking forward to attending other tournaments soon because one of his novice teams had advanced into the elimination rounds. This is the type of success that will foster the growth of policy debate.

However, the problem is somewhat cyclical in nature since as soon as policy debate grows to significant size it will in turn crowd out periferal programs. We need to learn from our relative short history, and maintain smaller tournaments where success is reachable by increased numbers of people. These smaller tournaments are a function of having several types of debate from which to select. In some ways I to long for the days where a typical tournament hosted 100+ debate teams in a single division, but that is the model which contributed to the demise of policy debate. It just wasn't possible for all programs to have a viable shot at doing well, ie, being in the top 16 after preliminaries. It is certianly easier when you have 60 teams spread over three divisions and break to quarterfinals. Clearly, students in some programs will continue to debate and will learn to enjoy the activity, only if they can enjoy a bit of success.

It has been argued that we could all just switch to non-policy debate and quit worrying about maintaining policy debate. This I feel is an unacceptable option since it would automatically increase the size of non-policy tournaments and therefore dramatically decrease the opportunities for success for

all members of the debate community. This I think is a serious disadvantage since it eliminates the opportunity to debate for significant numbers of students in both policy and nonpolicy debate.

Far to much time is spent worrying about having small tournaments. Many are small, but they are healthy and occasionally small may be better when it comes to maintaining the activity. Some people seem to want to gather all debaters together within single tournaments so that when someone "wins" they can conclude that they have indeed selected the superior team. Regardless of organizational or tournament structure a single winner in debate has never really been determined and I don't think that attempts to reach that goal are healthy for the activity.

INCREASED TOPIC ANALYSIS

An additional reason to keep policy debate is that more topics get debated. In this society we certainly don't have a shortage of problems which require our attention. Keeping policy debate increases the number of topics which receive consideration and, therefore, our awareness of significant contemporary problems is increased.

MAINTAIN SINGLE TOPIC:

Keeping policy debate also provides the debate community with an option of working with one topic all year. To the extent that the workload of coaches and debaters is a consideration, the maintenance of a type of debate which requires

preparation on only one topic per year might be conducive to maintaining the participation of some of those coaches and debaters.

What I have attempted to do are outline at least some of the reasons to maintain policy debate as an activity. As a person who has been involved in competitive intercollegiate policy debate for 25 years I am committed to the survival of the activity, or perhaps should be "committed". Anyone who has worked with debate, of any type, knows that it is not a bad way to make a living. Former students are a great source of job satisfaction.

SELECTED SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE POLICY DEBATE PARTICIPATION

This list of suggestions is not meant to be exhaustive, and I have chosen only those that have not received a lot of attention to date. From my frame of reference policy debate in my area of the country is fairly healthy. However, I think that the steps we have taken in the American Debate Association have helped to keep the activity healthy.

COMMITMENT TO NOVICE DEBATE

One primary way has been through the development of novice debate. We as a community of debate programs have dedicated a substantial amount of our resources to fostering the development of true novice debate. Our commitment several years ago has worked to keep at least novice and junior varsity debate healthy. The eventual impact upon varsity debate is unclear. Two things seem to be clear, we have allowed a number of students the opportunity

to debate who never would have debated, but it is not clear whether the majority of these students can catch up with students who come into college with substantial high school experience. It is clear, however, that treating novice debaters as equals and committing resources to them fosters growth in policy debate.

DEBATE INSTITUTES

It is to early to judge the impact of college debate institutes, but the response has been promising. The institutes appear to fill a gap existing due to lack of resources in schools who want a program, but might not be able to hire a coach or instances where you have one coach programs that benefit from extra help.

SHARING RESOURCES

Another way of filling the resource gap is to share materials, which the ADA has attempted to do, and perhaps it is time to start considering strange ideas such as circuit riding coaches who work with more than one program. These coaches could be funded by debate organizations rather than particular schools.

POINT SYSTEM MODIFICATION

I would urge the organizations who have point sytems to consider modifications in those systems which would reward programs which field large numbers of teams. To increase the size of policy debate tournaments we should encourage programs to field maximum numbers of teams. The current system seems to reward working with fewer teams which contributes to the demise of the activity. Counting more than two teams per tournament or

counting two or more teams per division at tournaments could work to reward larger programs and encourage others to add additional teams.

In summary, this is obviously not an exhaustive list of ways to foster the growth of the activity and I hope that all ideas are eventually shared. More importantly these ideas must become the foundation for action. We have all spent significant energy talking about our problems now is the time to act. Policy debate is an activity worth saving, but significant action is required.